Too Much by BooBerryPancakes

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Summary:

Richie has been in love with Eddie since they were kids, and would do anything for him. When Eddie reconnects with his deceased father's family, he doesn't want to attend Christmas alone. Eddie suggests a solution, Richie agrees, and Stan thinks they're both huge idiots.

Too Much

Author's Note:

> This was supposed to be a semi-short Christmas time fic, but then I thought "oh, I'll give it a bit of context" and then 15,000 words of context later, it isn't Christmas time yet. oops. I thought for a few days about how to change the beginning, but I couldn't come up with anything, so fuck it. I tried to edit, but I am old and tired, SORRY!!

It was Richie's fifth holiday season in Georgia, his first major milestone. During his first Georgia Christmas, he had travelled up to Maine to see his family and friends. The second year, his parents moved to Florida and therefore would not pay for the round-trip flight to Maine. Richie wasn't particularly fond of his parents, to put it kindly. And the main pull of giving up holiday pay was seeing old friends, not strategically parceling out topics of conversation so they wouldn't run out of safe subjects of discussion before the fourth day.

Richie had only gone back to Maine once after that first Christmas; when Eddie's mom passed away.

When all the losers graduated high school, he and Eddie were the only two not college bound. Eddie had declared his independence from his mother and her controlling ways in their childhood, but it became apparent about halfway through junior year that she was legitimately ill and not long for this world. The only other family Eddie had were his aunts, who were as useless as they were insufferable. Eddie couldn't abandon his mom, not with so little time left.

Richie understood, he really did. But he still thought the decision was undeniably insane. The woman was hell on Eddie's emotional and physical well-being, which would only be worse without school to go to and less friends in town.

Eddie had been pissed when Richie told him he wasn't going to college. Richie was smart in that natural way that infuriated

everyone in their friend group. People assumed Richie was dumb, mostly because he couldn't stop talking (though, to be fair, Richie was also no stranger to acting like a dumbass), but Richie simply had one of those brains that was perfect for traditional schooling. While the losers struggled in varying degrees with algebra and calculus, Richie solved and untangled each problem with the ease of solving a mildly difficult word jumble after only a glance over the textbook. Dates and events in history comfortably fit into a timeline in his mind, connecting in such a way that Richie was never caught off guard, no matter how specific the question was.

It was infuriating how easy it came to Richie, especially because Richie could not care less about school if he tried. He maintained straight A's but only took advanced classes when the other losers were taking them. He could have gotten into almost any school, and he could have gotten decent scholarships to get him through.

But Richie didn't want to. He never wanted any of that; Richie had only two goals. To make it big in comedy, and to have a life that made him happy, whatever that happened to mean.

For Richie, a happy life meant no more school than was strictly necessary. It meant having a job that didn't suck too much, paid enough to get by, and never left Richie with something to stress over after he clocked out. Right now, that job was at a terrible diner in Decatur where he had to wear roller skates. Fucking roller skates. Richie loved it.

Eddie was the only one in the friend group upset with Richie when he casually mentioned he wouldn't be applying to any colleges as he had no plans of going. "But you're smart," he insisted, as if this would somehow change the fact that school was still a torturous thing to Richie. "I get your point, but even if you never use the degree it will still give you more opportunities. There's plenty of bullshit majors Richie, and even those are better than nothing."

Eddie ended this largely ignored lecture with, "Please tell me you'll at least think about it?"

Richie looked up at him, he had gone back to reading his comic somewhere midway through Eddie's lecture, knowing enough to

know it was best to let Eddie tire himself out. There was nothing to think about; Richie was not going to college. He had already mulled over the why's and how's, but whenever he considered his future 'attending college' was never part of the equation. Richie knew it in his bones that college was not the place for him.

He knew it like he knew how in love with Eddie he was. The love had been there long before any understanding of it arrived, and it struck him again now while looking at Eddie. He was looking at Richie with genuine concern and pleading, sun slanting through the roof of the clubhouse and illuminating him in bits and pieces.

Fuck, he thought, knowing he'd do anything for Eds.

"Okay," Richie agreed. "I'll think about it."

The relieved and thankful smile Eddie gave him in return was more than worth it.

Eddie's wrath had turned out to be nothing compared to Richie's.

The little shit had been hiding his plan from them, because he knew the losers would all tell him, accurately, how terrible a decision it was. Eddie pretended to be looking and applying with the rest of them, saying vague statements about where exactly he applied and when he was thinking he would realistically hear back.

Richie finally pushed him in March, again while they were all studying in the clubhouse. "Come on Eds, you've had to have heard back from at least a few, right? Hell, even I've heard back from two now, and I didn't apply until January." He smiled at Eddie reassuringly, keeping his tone light. Richie, at Eddie's continued insistence, had caved and applied for a handful of schools over Christmas break. Agreeing to 'keep his options open.' Really, his plan was to follow Eddie to whichever school he chose and get an apartment together as they started their new lives as adults.

Eddie grimaced, and looked down at his open binders with a guilty look.

Richie was genuinely concerned at this point. Eddie struggled in school a lot more than Richie, but to struggle at all was to struggle more than Richie. Richie knew Eddie maintained A's as well, and he applied himself to school and participated in a few extracurriculars. Could he really have only received rejections?

"Eddie," Richie said, his tone more serious but still kind. "Please."

Eddie swallowed and squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm not going," he finally spat, nervous and fast.

Everyone froze, only turning to stare at Eddie. Richie was speechless, not knowing what to think.

"Wh… why Eddie?" Bill asked. His stutter had been mostly gone for a couple of years now, but in moments of extreme stress could sneak back in if he didn't focus. Richie could tell what happened just now was Bill stopping himself from stuttering.

"I'm staying," Eddie said, eyes now open but still furiously refusing to shift his gaze from his textbook.

"In Maine?" Stan asked.

"In Derry." Eddie answered.

The silence grew impossibly more tense, and it took about two more uncomfortable minutes for Richie's brain to process the information.

"What. The fuck," Richie said.

Eddie tensed again, having relaxed slightly in the long silence.

"Eddie," Richie said, his voice hard.

Eddie didn't move.

"Eddie!" Richie yelled, making the others jump.

Eddie looked up at him, his expression clearly trying to convey neutrality, but his eyes were wet, and his face was red. "*What,* Richie?"

“You’re not staying,” Richie said, in a tone meant to convey reasonableness.

“I am.”

“You’re not.”

“Richie,” Bill interjected, sensing where this was going.

“You are not staying Eddie.” Richie insisted, ignoring Bill.

“I’ve already decided Richie.”

“Then undecide.”

Eddie snorted.

“It’s not fucking funny, Eddie,” Richie said, rage beginning to leak into his voice.

“Richie,” Bill began again.

“No Bill!” Richie yelled, turning towards him. “He can’t fucking stay here.”

“Mike is staying too.”

“That’s different Bill and you fucking know it!”

“Richie, I know. I know. But he must have a reason.” Bill said calmly, trying to placate Richie.

Eddie interrupted then, “Hey, can you maybe not talk about me like I’m not here?”

“Oh sorry, are we worthy enough for you to fucking explain yourself to now?” Richie shot back with venom.

“Okay Richie,” Ben said, in the same infuriatingly reasonable voice as Bill.

“Don’t fucking,” Richie began, only getting louder, “Don’t fucking ‘okay’ me, I’m not the one with the big fucking secret right now.”

“It was only a secret because I knew you would act like this,” Eddie said.

“Hey Eddie, not helpful,” Stan warned, but it was too late.

“Stop Eddie, fucking stop! What the fuck is wrong with you? Don’t act like it’s fucking my fault; you hid it because you know it’s an insane idea and that we would call you out on this bullshit. You aren’t fucking staying here, you’re just not!” Richie screamed.

Eddie, also not heeding the warnings of the others, met his anger in kind, “You can’t fucking tell me what to do!”

“Really? That’s your excuse? That’s really fucking hypocritical Eddie. After all that bullshit about college, but what you’re thinking of doing is a thousand times worse and you fucking know it!”

Eddie stayed silent at that, and Richie was prepared to continue when Mike grabbed his arm. “Richie,” he said in a warning tone.

Richie turned and glared at Mike, but before he could make a harsh reply Stan grabbed his other arm. Stan didn’t have to say anything, the stern expression he met Richie’s glare with was enough.

Richie glared at Stan for a few moments before letting out a frustrated sigh. “Fine,” he huffed, then turned out of both their grasps and made his way up the ladder, Mike and Stan following.

Besides Eddie, Stan was Richie’s best friend. It was a different kind of friendship than the one he shared with Eddie, quiet and calm. Stan did not put up with any of Richie’s usual bullshit, and Richie needed that from time to time. Someone who wouldn’t allow him to fall back on his façade and jokes, who saw Richie’s insecurities for what they were.

Stan was the only one who knew Richie was gay, gay and in love with Eddie. So, he was the only one who knew how deep his current rage was, and what it was hiding.

Once they walked a decent amount away from the clubhouse, Mike said, “I’m going to explain it to you, but I’m going to need you to try and not yell at me through it.”

Richie clenched his fist, “You knew?” He asked. When Mike nodded, he turned to Stan accusatorily. “Did you?”

“No,” Stan answered. *Calm the fuck down idiot*, his tone added.

“I’m the only one he told,” Mike explained. “Since he knew I’m staying here too. You’re not wrong for being upset Richie, I tried to talk him out of it as well. But his mom’s sick man. She doesn’t have anyone else, and she doesn’t have long.”

“So?” Richie asked, his anger unaltered. “Who fucking cares? She’s been nothing but awful to him, he can’t stay here. He can’t stay with her, man.” Here, finally, his anger was beginning to give way to the dread and concern which fueled it.

“I know that,” Mike said, patient and kind. “But Richie, she’s all the family he has left. He’s all she has left.”

“So fucking what?” Richie asked again, his voice still angry but hot tears now spilling out of his eyes. “He has us.”

Mike didn’t have an answer for that. Instead, Stan grabbed his shoulders. “Richie. Eddie knows the millions of reasons why he shouldn’t do this. But he’s already made his decision.” He paused, then added, “He’s losing a lot right now Rich. Don’t add yourself to that list.”

And then Richie sobbed, falling into Stan as he had done before when confessing his handful of secrets to him. Richie sobbed because he realized they were right; Eddie would be staying in Derry. Eddie was losing so much, maybe years of his new adult life, and all Richie could think about was how he was losing his best friend and first love. Up until this point, all the changes that graduating brought seemed exciting. Now, for the first time, Richie was terrified of what was to come.

Richie and Eddie never talked about it, not directly. Richie avoided him for a few days so he could process, then went back to treating Eddie exactly the same. He disagreed with Eddie’s decision, strongly disagreed, but he knew it was impossible for him to completely understand Eddie’s point of view. So, he swallowed his feelings, and

did what he could to support his friend. His love.

Richie couldn't stay in Derry though. If Eddie was going to make his decision, then Richie would make his. Instead of following Eddie, he followed Stan. Stan had chosen to attend Georgia Tech, so Richie signed a lease for a two bedroom with him in Atlanta.

Atlanta turned out to be great for Richie. He blew through a few jobs before finding the perfect one roller skating around the aforementioned restaurant. Without school and the uniquely terrible atmosphere of Derry weighing him down, his life felt much more his own. His happiness was further helped by no longer speaking to his parents. It took only one Christmas to figure that out.

Atlanta was also the first place Richie came out to someone besides Stan and his parents. He hadn't been planning to at first, thinking he would be content to bury the secret deep down inside himself until he died. But some time during the stress of moving and building a new life for himself, Richie felt the need emerge to declare who he is, even if it was to just one other person.

He would look back on it later and think it had been a crazy and stupid thing for him to do. Atlanta is Atlanta, but it is undeniably in the South. And the person Richie chose to come out to was not someone he knew all that well at the time. It was easy for Richie to see, even only two days later, how rash his decision had been. He was so deeply embarrassed by it he didn't tell Stan for weeks, even though Stan often suggested he try sharing who he was with other people, and would have been delighted at the news.

Richie could have easily chosen the wrong person to tell. He could have ruined his new life before it really began.

Thankfully, he didn't choose the wrong person.

Steve was his coworker, and one of maybe four or five people Richie knew who was taller than himself. Steve was a couple of years older than Richie, but only began working at the restaurant a few months before him. He had grown up in a suburban city about an hour from

Atlanta and, like Richie, chose to forego college after graduating high school. He played drums in various bands, and while he claimed music was all he wanted to do, wasn't taking his current band too seriously.

From the very first shift, Richie and Steve clicked. They clicked in that way you do with the occasional coworker; where you become such good friends at work you sometimes even hang out outside of work. The job suddenly goes by much faster, and each task is infinitely more enjoyable. When you're both on the schedule, other coworkers will make good natured comments about wondering if you two will be able get any work done.

Despite not actually growing up in Atlanta, Steve was the Atlanta native Richie needed. He showed him how to use Marta, where to find the best restaurants and shops, and what areas to avoid on Sundays when megachurch traffic shut down roads.

Richie, out of seemingly nowhere, got it in his head to tell one other human being he was gay. He got it in his head that person should be Steve. Twenty minutes later, on their shared smoke break, he did.

"I'm gay," he announced with no preamble. They were standing in the alley, empty except for the two of them.

"Oh," Steve said, caught off guard. "Um. Congratulations?"

"Uh," Richie replied, unsure of what to say next.

"Did you figure this out recently?"

"No. No, I uh. Realized first in middle school, at least I knew I had a crush on my best friend. Then in high school, when I was trying to get over him, I made out with girls at parties, and it kind of sucked. I did the math from there."

Steve laughed, "Fuck, I did that too man. Not the crush on my best friend thing, but I did attempt several times to sleep with girls at parties before I could admit to myself it wasn't just whiskey dick."

Richie, who had been taking a drag, coughed in surprise. "Wait- are you?"

“Yeah dude, did you not know?”

Richie shook his head, still processing the news.

“Oh, well sorry. I don’t talk about it much, because, you know,” he shrugged, “Georgia. But I also don’t try to hide it.”

Richie nodded, remaining silent and thoughtful.

Their break ended soon after that, and they did not broach the subject again for a couple of months.

“Hey,” Steve said, rolling over to Richie, who was currently wiping down the tables. The restaurant had closed about half an hour before and the shift had been a long one; Richie and Steve had only exchanged a handful of words in the past four hours.

“Hey,” Richie answered, smiling at his friend.

“Want to see a movie tonight?”

Richie was tired, and he would most likely have another long day tomorrow. But Stan had been busy with school lately, and Eddie hadn’t called in the past month. He felt lonely and hanging out with Steve seemed like better rest than a decent night of sleep.

“Yeah, sounds good.”

Steve smiled, “Awesome! Think about what you want to see, I gotta go hide in the bathroom for a bit so Rachel doesn’t make me take out the trash again.”

Richie laughed as Steve rolled away.

He and Steve had hung out before, but they began doing so more regularly over the next couple of weeks. Something felt… different. Richie wasn’t sure what it was, but the air between them seemed to change now whenever they were together outside of work. It was different, but nice, so Richie tried not to let it bother him too much.

He figured out what it was a couple of weeks later.

Steve was leaving Richie and Stan's apartment, returning to work after a two-hour break. He and Richie had worked the early morning shift together, and then went to the apartment for a long lunch.

Since Richie would not be returning to work, he had taken a quick shower after they got back. He had been slightly worried about leaving Steve by himself, but Stan wasn't home, and her had been around so often lately that he was comfortable in the apartment.

"Hey so, when's our next shift together?" Steve asked as Richie walked him to the front door.

"I don't think we have any until next week."

Steve frowned, "Oh well, that's too bad."

"Hey," Richie said, playfully pushing his arm, "It's all good, I'm going to be at your show Thursday night."

"Really?" Steve asked. They had arrived at the door now, and Steve had turned around to meet Richie's eyes.

Richie blinked. "Yeah," he answered, finally identifying what was different.

Steve smiled. "Cool," he said, and then kissed Richie.

Richie, when he thought through it after Steve left, wasn't entirely sure how he felt about this new development. He liked Steve, and he liked having someone interested in him, but he had never considered Steve as anything more than a friend before, even after he learned he was gay. But Richie liked him enough, and he wasn't currently interested in anyone else. So, he thought, why the hell not?

For months their relationship developed; some nights they went out to movie or dinner as they had before, others they spent at home making out while watching movies or, eventually, sleeping together.

Richie didn't tell Eddie any of this during their few phone calls, but he did tell Stan.

“Oh, is he your boyfriend?” Stan asked.

Richie knit his eyebrows in thought, “No? We haven’t talked about that.”

Stan gave him an ‘are you serious look’ and said, “I think he might be your boyfriend, Rich.”

When Richie later brought up the subject to Steve, he gave him a confused look. “Yeah? I kind of thought it was obvious Richie.”

“Is it?” Richie asked. He was afraid to come off as hurtful, but genuinely did not know their relationship had grown to this level.

“Yeah dude,” Steve answered. “We go on dates at least once a week. We talk every day.” He then crowded into Richie’s space, backing him up into the counter. “We do this,” he whispered, before kissing Richie.

So, Richie guessed he had a boyfriend. The fact he hadn’t even realized this development was probably not a great sign, but Richie did like Steve and he liked having a boyfriend. As far as Richie was concerned, he was fucking killing life in Atlanta.

He missed Eddie though, missed him a lot. Eddie and Richie’s relationship would remain tense for those two years between graduating and Sonia passing. Richie tip toeing around his extreme disapproval of Eddie’s decision, and Eddie trying to bite his tongue whenever he thought Richie was making dumb choices to avoid being hypocritical.

They didn’t talk much during the two years, but that was purely due to the circumstances. Sonia hated Richie until the bitter end, and Eddie became less and less willing to take a stand against her as she became sicker and sicker.

So, when Richie got a call from him 4:00 in the afternoon on a Tuesday, he already knew something was up.

“Eddie?” he answered, out of breath and concerned. He was at work

and had dashed from the dining area to the back office as fast as he could when he was told by his manager that someone named Eddie had called asking for him. He had told Eddie where he worked, just in case of emergencies, and he couldn't imagine Eddie ever using the number if it wasn't an emergency.

"Richie," Eddie said, voice thick with tears. "It's over."

"Oh, Eddie," Richie answered. Selfishly however, a weight in his chest was lifted. It was finally over.

"I don't know what to do now," Eddie confessed, now freely crying. "I don't know how to feel, and I have no fucking idea what to do next."

"I do," Richie said. "I know. The first thing you're going to do is pick me up from the airport, probably at ass'o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Richie, you can't-"

"Shut up. We're not arguing right now. It'll take me a couple of hours to get to the airport, I'll call you from there once I get a flight. Okay?"

Eddie was silent for a moment, then replied, "Okay."

"Are you going to be okay until then?"

"Yeah. I mean, yeah."

"Okay," Richie said, not trusting the reply but also couldn't think of a better solution. "I'll be there as soon as I can Eddie. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Eddie?"

"Yeah, Richie?"

"I love you." Growing up, it was only during particularly tough times that any of the losers said 'I love you' to each other. But now, they spoke so seldomly, the last time had been months ago, that this

exchange was customary.

“I love you too,” Eddie replied.

“See you soon,” Richie said, then hung up the phone. He immediately picked it up and called Mike, explaining what happened and asked him to go to Eddie’s as soon as he could. Mike agreed, of course.

Richie would have gone to the airport straight from work, would have waited until he was going through security to take off his roller skates just to save time. But he went to the apartment to pack his suitcase first, in case Eddie wanted him to go to the funeral. He was trying to be as considerate as possible, trying to not be an asshole.

Because he felt like a pretty big asshole.

Because under all his concern for Eddie, he felt a sick and twisted relief. It was all over. He was getting Eddie back now.

Richie spent almost two weeks in Derry. All the other losers independently offered to come, but Eddie refused each of them. Everyone else was in the middle of midterms, and there wasn’t anything they could realistically do to make this easier on him.

Richie helped Eddie as much as he could. There was a lot more to deal with after someone died than Richie could have imagined, but a lot of the major decisions had been dealt with long before. This was a consequence of Eddie’s father passing away suddenly and his mother knowing she was terminally ill. She had loved Eddie, and she knew how awful it was to have someone died and to be left with no plan and a million decisions to make. She had done what she could to not leave him in that situation.

Her death was a hard, complicated thing Eddie went through. She had loved him. She had hurt him, but that had been a result of an untreated mental illness. She was horrible to Eddie. She was horrible to Eddie because she was scared. She was Eddie’s mother who loved and hurt him, and she was gone. She could never hurt Eddie again, and Eddie would never see his mother who loved him again.

Richie could logically understand that being horrible to Eddie and

loving Eddie were not mutually exclusive things, but even after she passed, he still thought Eddie staying with her had been the wrong decision. But now that she was gone, now that it was over, it was easier to move on.

During those two weeks, Eddie never wanted to be alone. They shared the bed in Eddie's room every night, which they hadn't done since Richie out-grew the window sophomore year and couldn't sneak in anymore.

Richie, trying to be considerate and not an asshole, did not ask about the two years. Eddie didn't bring it up until the fourth morning.

The funeral had been the day before, and Eddie had fallen asleep clinging to Richie and crying silent tears. Each day so far, Eddie had woken up at 5:30 AM and Richie with him. Apparently, this had been the schedule Eddie's mother was on, so it was habit, and there was so much shit to do anyway they might as well get an early start each day. Richie did this without complaint.

The night before, when Eddie finally fell asleep, Richie carefully untangled himself enough to reach over and yank the chord of the alarm clock out of the outlet. He was scared to overstep, but he knew Eddie hadn't been sleeping well. Everything tomorrow could wait a couple of hours.

Richie, surprisingly, woke up naturally around 7:00 AM. Careful not to wake Eddie, he cautiously removed himself from the bed, and went downstairs to the kitchen to make coffee and breakfast.

Eddie quietly padded into the kitchen a little after 8:00, Richie sitting at the table reading at that point.

"Hey," Richie greeted. "I really hope you don't mind, but I let you sleep in. I thought you needed it."

Eddie avoided his gaze but nodded in response. He didn't seem mad, but he wasn't conveying any other emotion either.

"I made the coffee already, and I made myself some eggs. Why don't you sit down? I'll get your breakfast."

Eddie nodded again, walked across the kitchen and sat down opposite Richie at the table. Richie stood and tried to not let himself get nervous as he made Eddie's breakfast.

He finally met his gaze, looking up at Richie when he brought him his coffee. His eyebrows raised in surprise.

"What?" Richie asked. Eddie's response was to quickly look at the coffee, then back up at him. It was hardly an explanation, but Richie understood Eddie's body language. "Dude, I love you. Of course I know how you take your fucking coffee."

Eddie blinked, then took the cup. "Thank you, Chee," he said quietly.

For the first time that week, Richie's heart swelled with the familiar ache of being in love with his best friend. It had been dormant due to the separation, and thankfully quiet under the concern and goal of helping Eddie with his immediate situation. But God, this was the kind of thing Richie had always fantasized about. Not the funeral or the paperwork, but the quiet mornings and handing his love his coffee.

"Course," he responded, then went back to making Eddie breakfast.

It wasn't until he brought the plate of eggs and toast over a couple of minutes later that Richie became aware of Eddie silently crying.

"Hey, *hey*," he said, dropping the plate quickly and then sitting in the chair next to Eddie's. He pulled him into a hug and rubbed his back. "Eddie," he said gently, attempting to soothe whatever the issue was.

"I'm sorry," Eddie gasped, voice shaky. "I just, fuck."

"Eds, it's fine." He squeezed his arms then gently pushed him back so Richie could meet his eyes. "It's okay."

Eddie nodded, calmer but a few tears still leaking out. He turned his body towards the table and stared down at his eggs. Richie kept one arm loosely over his shoulders.

"It's just, I forgot. I forgot what it was like to have friends around, for someone to care about me. I know that sounds bitchy and

overdramatic-“

“It doesn’t,” Richie cut him off, squeezing his shoulder in reassurance.

Eddie briefly allowed a small smile. “You know how she was. She loved me but she really loved… her idea of what her perfect son would be. It’s been a while since I’ve been around someone who sees me for who I really am, and fucking cares about who I really am.” Eddie swallowed then quickly added, “Please don’t say I told you so, or anything like that.”

“Dude. I wouldn’t,” Richie said, genuinely.

Eddie nodded, then leaned into Richie. “Thank you, Richie. For not. And for being here now. And for being my friend.”

“Of course,” Richie replied, a lump forming in his throat, “Of course, Eds.”

Eddie nodded, and they stayed like that until his eggs got cold.

Up until then, Richie had been able to pretend his life outside of Derry didn’t exist or was at least on hold. He and Stan talked on the phone every other day, and he knew Stan was handling any calls that came in for Richie, but he didn’t ask so Stan didn’t bring it up.

Richie’s sudden reawakening of his love for Eddie came with a guilt for his current boyfriend, who he had been dating for over a year but did not love, and had not even informed that he would be in Maine indefinitely.

“So, uh, have you heard from Steve at all?” Richie asked Stan on the phone later that day, not wanting to open a can of worms but also painfully aware of how shitty of a boyfriend he was.

“He’s been calling the apartment,” Stan explained without any hesitance. “I told him you were okay, and that you would be out of town for a while, but I wouldn’t give him the number. He’s pretty pissed at me.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Richie said, gratitude clear in his voice. “I can’t talk to him right now. Thank you.”

“Of course. How is Eddie doing?”

“Um. Well,” Richie replied, weighing his words carefully. He wasn’t sure how active Eddie was listening, but he could definitely hear Richie right now.

Stan, understanding, asked, “Say yes for surprisingly good, no for particularly bad.”

Richie, thinking Eddie was neither extreme, tried to sound noncommittal when he answered, “Hmm. Maybe.”

“So about how you would expect for the situation?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s complicated, but overall I would agree with your statement.”

Stan chuckled at Richie’s overly formal statement. “Okay, well that’s good. Are you sure I shouldn’t come up?”

“Yeah dude. He spent like over an hour yelling at Bev and Ben that they should not show up under any circumstances.”

Stan sighed, “Okay, but if it seems like he has any doubts tell him I’d be happy to get up there. Seriously.”

Richie smiles to himself. “Will do Stan. And thank you for handling all my shit at home.”

“Of course, idiot. I miss you.”

“I miss you too dude. I’ll see if Eddie wants to talk?”

“Yes please,” Stan replied.

Eddie did want to talk and took the phone happily. Richie took the opportunity to go on a short walk. He would never describe himself as active but working on his feet all day made him feel restless when he was suddenly not doing that. He would usually get Eddie to go

with him, figuring it was important to ensure he was active, but he wanted the alone time to properly think through the situation with Steve.

Even when Richie was attempting to not be a total jerk, he had only talked about Steve for less than a minute before letting the conversation steer back to Eddie. Richie was still unsure when their time in Derry would end, when everything would be wrapped up and Eddie would be ready to move on, but Richie knew his life was about to change, possibly drastically, because he wasn't going to let he and Eddie be separated again.

He realized that he and Steve were probably over. And he realized he should tell Steve that. Richie reasoned he could wait until he had a more specific reason to give him. He also reasoned this was kind of bull shit, but he wanted to continue avoiding his problems.

Mike told Richie later that he hadn't seen Eddie at all in the last months leading up to his mom dying. The sicker she got, the meaner and more critical she became. From his understanding, it legitimately became easier on Eddie to not speak to Mike than to feel like a person for a few minutes and set his mother off. Mike hated it and did what he could to fight the situation. But the farm had been busy, Eddie had been stubborn, and it was clear where the end was going at that point.

Richie still held resentment for Mike. He knew it was a misplaced anger, spurred on by feelings of helplessness and guilt. But ever since he revealed he knew Eddie's plan to stay in Derry after high school, Richie could not completely trust Mike.

Richie was relieved when Eddie finally confirmed he would no longer be staying in Derry. Richie had been itching to ask since day one, but it was obviously not the time and he was hesitant to reopen old wounds. He tried not to seem too gleeful when Eddie offhandedly mentioned at the end of the first week that they needed to begin packing the next day.

Richie made a rapid decision to seize the moment. "You know I'll go

with you, right? Wherever you choose, Eds. You can't escape me."

Eddie gave him a confused look, "What are you talking about? I'm going with you to Atlanta."

Richie shot his eyebrows up, "You are?"

"Yeah," Eddie replied, looking more hesitant now. "Is that okay?"

Richie paused to think it over. He had never considered the possibility, but now that it was an option, Richie thought the idea was better than okay. He liked living with Stan, and he surprisingly loved his life in Atlanta. He was ready to leave it behind, but if he didn't have to…

"Hell yeah, I mean, that would be awesome. But are you sure?"

Eddie smiled at him and Richie's heart skipped a beat. "Yes, I'm sure. You said it's awesome, and that's good enough for me."

So when Richie called Stan that night he gave him the news that Eddie would be moving in.

"Good," Stand said. "I'll start looking for three bedrooms."

Stan's love language was acts of service.

They spent the extra week packing up the house. After countless trips to Goodwill and one awkward one to his Aunt's, only Eddie's possessions remained, which all fit easily into a rented SUV.

The night before they left, Eddie went out with Mike for dinner. He had been around many times over the past two weeks, but Eddie felt strongly he and Mike needed some proper one on one time before his departure. Mike had become Eddie's other best friend in those two long years, and this separation would be bittersweet.

It was the only time during those two weeks that Richie was by himself for more than one hour. He took full advantage of the situation and called Stan five minutes after they left.

"Stan, I'm sorry," Richie immediately began, "But please tell me you

have the time to let me freak out on the phone for, like, maybe an hour?"

"Of course man," Stan replied, unphased. "Honestly, I kind of expected a freak out call way earlier."

"Yeah, well, Eds was always around."

"Make sense."

"Okay so, first things first. Still stupidly in love with him."

"Was there ever a question?"

"There was a hope!" Richie quipped, frustrated. "Sorry, just. I had forgotten how strong it was, and how fucking annoying it is to be head over heels for your friend."

"It's okay dude." Stan reassured, then jumped back into not putting up with bullshit. "Have you told him you're gay?"

"What the fuck dude?"

"Richie, he's not homophobic. He's your best friend. And then you're one step closer to admitting you love him."

"Which is the exact reason I wouldn't tell him. And his mom just died, Stan. What the fuck would I even say? 'My condolences for your remaining parent's death, who you had a complicated relationship with, also I like dick, specifically yours.' That's a real good idea, dude."

"Well that's certainly more concise than you typically are, which I would argue is an improvement," Stan deadpanned.

"Fuck you, bro."

"Look, Richie," Stan said, his voice kinder, "I care about you. You know this shit isn't going to get easier."

Richie sighed, letting the situation sink in. "I know Stan. But I can't dude. I just… I can't."

There was a moment of silence before Stan's reply, "Okay. Okay, Richie. You know I won't say anything. Just tell me if there's anything I can do to help."

"Thanks man, I will." Richie answered, feeling grateful.

"Now I have to ask," Stan began, sounding serious again.

"Oh no," Richie replied, his gratitude shattering.

"What are you going to do about Steve?"

"Fuck Stan, I don't know."

"Richie."

"I know I need to break up with him."

"Hm."

"I probably should have broken up with him a while ago."

"Maybe."

"Or at least told him where I was fucking going."

"Yeah."

"Ugh," Richie groaned.

"Did you want me to jump in now?" Stan asked.

"Yes."

"You're right and you should call him."

"I didn't want that answer," Richie said.

"I know," Stan replied. "And while I disagree, I also know you probably want to hide this whole thing from Eddie, so maybe you should go ahead and call him before he and Mike get back."

"Ugh," Richie groaned again, "Fine, you're right. But first tell me

about your week, I fucking miss you man."

"I miss you too Richie, and I'll tell you about my week later, you've got a boyfriend to break up with."

"Being gay sucks."

"Uh, I don't think breaking up sucking is exclusive to being gay dude."

"Shut up, you're a jerk and I hate you."

"I love you too Richie," Stan replied, unphased by Richie's tantrum. "Do you know his phone number, or do you need to write it down?"

"I know it," Richie said, resigned.

"Good. I'll see you soon. Drive safe tomorrow."

"Thanks Stan," Richie answered, the dial tone starting as soon he finished the words.

The phone rung three times when he called, and Richie was beginning to hope that Steve wouldn't answer when he heard him say, "Hello?"

"Hey Steve," he said nervously.

"Richie!" Steve exclaimed, clearly surprised. "Oh my god, Richie, how are you? Where are you?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm sorry I haven't called."

"Richie I've been so fucking worried, and I've missed you so much."

"I know Steve, and I'm sorry," Richie said genuinely.

There was an awkward silence then, Richie not exactly sure how to continue.

"Where are you Richie?" Steve asked again, sounding less relieved.

"I'm in Maine," he answered. Over the two years they had known

each other, he had told Steve a lot about his childhood. He had told Steve about the best friend he had fallen in love with who had stayed behind, and he knew Steve would be able to do the math now.

“What’s going on?” Steve asked carefully.

“Eddie’s mom passed, I came up here to be with him and help him wrap things up and, uh, get him ready to move.”

“Move?”

Richie swallowed. “Yeah, he’s uh moving in with me and Stan.”

There was a long few minutes of dead air after that; Richie felt like he should say something more to try and make this better. But there wasn’t anything that would make the situation better, and Richie had sucked pretty hard as a boyfriend up until this point anyway.

“This is over, isn’t it?” Steve asked.

Richie sighed, but did not deny it, “Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“You kind of should be, this has been a terrible way to dump someone,” Steve replied, but he didn’t sound upset. His tone almost seemed light.

Richie chuckled, “Yeah. Supremely terrible.”

“Absolutely awful, abysmal,” Steve added, definitely teasing now, “Honestly, if you’re going to be this much of a jerk you might as well be straight.”

Richie laughed, then asked, “You’re not mad?”

“Oh no, I’m pissed,” Steve clarified. “And upset. But sometime after the first week of radio silence I figured this was over. No offense Rich, but you weren’t that great of a boyfriend before this terrible break up either.”

“Yeah, I kind of suspected that,” Richie admitted. “I really am sorry Steve.”

“I know, but I appreciate you saying so. Anyway, when are you coming back?”

Richie, thankful for the subject change, replied, “We’re leaving tomorrow, might take a couple of days to drive down there.”

“Okay cool. I’ll tell Rachel to put you on next week’s schedule.”

“Thanks man.”

“No problem. Drive safe tomorrow, Richie,” Steve said, and then ended the call before Richie could reply.

Richie was smoking on the front porch when Mike and Eddie arrive home. He hadn’t smoked at all during this trip before now, since Eddie disliked it. Richie didn’t actually smoke all that much at home either, but he was still surprised how long he had lasted with the stress of being back in Derry.

He was thinking about his life back home; about his job, Steve, Stan. He missed roller skating, he missed the regulars at work, he missed the view from their balcony during when he smoked at home, and he really fucking missed Stan. Richie knew he and Stan had grown closer while living together, but only now realized the extent of the co-reliance they had developed.

Richie was ready to go home.

Eddie went upstairs shortly after getting back, declaring he wanted to get to bed early for the big day tomorrow. He hugged Mike a final time, and promised to call every other day, then left he and Richie alone to say their final goodbyes.

Mike sat down next to Richie. “Can I bum one off you?”

Richie nodded, pulling another cigarette out of his pack and lighting it before handing it to Mike. “You smoke?”

“Not really,” Mike said before taking a drag. “I think we need to talk.”

Richie raised his eyebrows. “We do?” he asked, having just had two serious conversations and not necessarily feeling up to a third.

“Yeah,” Mike said. He took a deep breath and stared up at the moon. “About Eddie.”

Richie’s knee jerk reaction was to get defensive, but he recognized there was no reason to yet, so he only made a non-committal noise in response.

“I did what I could Richie, you should know that. Sonia didn’t hate me as much as she hated you, but there was only so much I could do. I was usually able to see Eddie once a week, but not always. And these last few months…” Mike took another drag. “I would be lucky to get him on the phone for more than a minute every other week.

“It got dark, Richie. We all knew it would eventually, but I was stupid enough to accept that maybe Eddie just didn’t want to talk to me anymore. He was so isolated here.”

Richie wanted to be mad at Mike, but really, he was only mad at himself. When was the last time he talked to Eddie before Sonia passed? He realized he couldn’t remember, because the time between phone calls kept getting longer and longer. He knew Eddie was isolated, stuck here with the woman who treated him so horribly. Why the fuck had he not insisted on speaking daily?

Mike took another drag, then turned towards Richie.

“His mom did a number on him, and these two years did a lot worse. He’s strong, and brave, but I’m worried about him adjusting. I suspect it won’t be easy, and I felt like I should say something.”

Richie nodded. “I’m glad you did,” he said, and he was. He could see how much Mike cared about Eddie, and Richie was the one who had done the easy thing and got the fuck out of Derry. He was scared to fuck things up with Eddie again, and knowing Mike was also looking out for Eddie too was invaluable. “Thank you, Mike. For being here for him.”

Mike smiled sadly at him. “You don’t have to thank me, man. Losers

gotta stick together, right?"

Richie chuckled, "Yeah. Right."

The two hugged then, and promised to keep in touch, and Richie felt some of the hardness he felt towards Mike soften.

Richie had an inkling before that the adjustment wasn't going to be simple, that it would be hard enough to un-learn growing up with a mother like Eddie's, and that the past two years bumped the intensity up to an 11. The morning after the funeral had been the first confirmation of that. What Mike had just told him was the second.

Richie hated himself. He knew now he never should have left. He hated Derry, but it wasn't as bad for him as it was for Eddie. He had been a coward with a hurt pride, and Eddie suffered for it.

When he got in bed with Eddie that night, he wrapped himself around him, hugging Eddie to his chest. Richie hadn't initiated any contact while they slept next to each other, afraid of crossing a boundary. But he couldn't resist it tonight.

Eddie's response was to make a sleepy contented sound. He laid his hand over Richie's and fell asleep.

It took them only a couple days to drive down, mostly because Richie refused to stop at a motel, insisting that the proper road trip way was to down an energy drink and plow through. The trip down was a lot of fun; both feeling lighter the farther they got from Derry.

They got back to Atlanta late, parking at the apartment around 1:00 in the morning. The lack of sleep caught up with Richie, and he could not fathom how he would unload the car right now but knew it would be a bad idea to leave a loaded car in the open parking lot.

They headed inside first, to use the restroom and get some water. After Stan and Eddie had their fast, half-asleep reunion, Stan took one look at Richie and said, "Go to bed."

Richie shook his head, "Gotta unload the car."

“Bed,” Stan said. “Both of you. I’ll handle it.”

Richie was too tired to protest, so he simply nodded. “Thanks Stan,” he added before turning and going to his room.

He quickly stripped down and put on a pair of sweatpants and grabbed a spare pair for Eddie since his clean clothes were still packed away.

He looked back into the living room, where Eddie was now awkwardly standing alone. “Dude, come on.”

Eddie jumped a bit, apparently startled. “I mean, I can sleep on the couch, I don’t want to impose-“

“Shut up,” Richie interrupted, too tired to dance around the subject. He tossed the sweatpants at Eddie, which landed unceremoniously on his shoulders and half his face. “I’m fucking tired dude, put those on and come to bed.”

Eddie didn’t protest again, ducking into the bathroom to change.

He paused again in Richie’s door frame, Richie now relaxing on his bed. His room was messy and sparsely decorated, old dishes, laundry and trash covering most of the available space. On his walls he had a few photos of he and the other losers, and one of him and Stan when they first moved in. On one wall was a huge black and white tapestry, sent to him by Bev. The neatest corner of the room was a lounge chair in which Richie kept his work clothes, he liked his job and wanted to avoid being tardy because he couldn’t find his name tag under his other piles of bullshit.

His bed was pushed into the corner, which allowed more floorspace. There was no headboard, but Richie had hung fairy lights on the wall around where one would be. Richie laid against the wall now, wanting to allow Eddie to have the open side.

“M’sorry it’s messy,” Richie said, only realizing now that maybe Eddie wanted to sleep on the couch because of how nasty Richie’s room would inevitably be. “I’ll clean tomorrow.”

“No, it’s,” Eddie began, pausing to continue to take the room in. “It’s

just so you." He crossed the room carefully, trying to avoid stepping on anything. When he sat down on the bed he added, "I've missed you."

Richie reached out and squeezed his arm. "I've missed you too, Eds," and after a pause added, "Welcome home."

Eddie smiled, small and genuine. "Yeah. Home."

Eddie ended up fitting into Atlanta really well. He thought it was hilarious how curly Richie's unkept hair could get in the humidity. He found a job working daycare at the Y, saving up extra money while he applied to local colleges to attend in the fall.

Richie, true to his word, cleaned the next day. And because Eddie and him would be sharing a room for the last few months in the apartment, it stayed tidy. They eventually moved the bed away from the corner, so they could both freely get in and out. Eddie arranged Richie's decorations and belongings in a way that made it much easier for Richie to keep tidy.

Many of Eddie's belongings remained packed away, the boxes arranged into a tight corner of the living room. What Eddie needed on a day to day basis was kept wherever there was a spare space in the small apartment. Mostly in Richie's room, but also in Stan's, and on one shelf in the pantry where they made room after reorganizing it.

They moved to a proper 3 bedroom three months later but maintained the sense of openness and free space they had developed out of necessity. Their bedroom doors remained open at all hours, and their fridge looked more of that of a family than of three roommates, only one carton of eggs the three shared as opposed to three separate ones.

Eddie thrived in Atlanta, really finding a groove for himself. Richie's worst fear occasionally materialized; Eddie had a panic attack about once a week and usually asked Richie to sleep in his bed the night after.

Once, Stan asked him to get a certain type of almond milk when Eddie went grocery shopping, and when Eddie realized he'd bought the wrong one after he got home he broke down into fearful tears and could not stop apologizing to Stan.

"Eddie, Eddie, it's okay," Stan reassured, again and again. "Mistakes happen. And it's Atlanta, not Derry, I can find somewhere to get almond milk whenever I need to. It's okay Eddie, I'm not mad."

Richie hadn't been home during this episode, only getting back from work after the worst of it had passed. Stan didn't tell him the full story until a few days later, when the two of them went out to dinner by themselves.

"Damn," Richie said, running his hand through his hair in a nervous tick.

"Richie," Stan said, sounding serious. "We have to stop pussyfooting around this."

Richie snorted at the word choice.

"I'm serious."

"I know, I know Stan," Richie said, "This subject's just a fucking downer."

"I know," Stan sighed, but then continued. "He's starting school next month, and student services will have counseling. We have to make sure he goes."

"Fuck, dude."

"Richie."

"Stan, therapy fucking sucks."

"Not everyone has your weird trust issues, dude. And yeah it sucks, but a lot of adult things fucking suck and we do them anyway because the alternatives suck more." He paused to let that sink in and then added, "And maybe if you went back to-"

“No.” Richie said, cutting him off. He wasn’t going down that road tonight.

“Sorry,” Stan replied. Richie could tell he meant it, and he was grateful for Stan’s willingness to drop the subject. Stan continued more gently, “It’s amazing where he’s at after all he’s been through, and it’s amazing how much you’re able to help him. But it’s not enough Rich, and you know that. I need to know I’ll have you support, that he will have your support.”

Richie huffed and slumped in his seat, knowing he was acting childishly. But he knew Stan was right, so allowed himself the small pleasure in conveying his frustration. He hated not being able to fix Eddie’s problems for him. He hated himself for what he felt at least partially responsible for, though he knew Eddie would insist none of this was his fault. Richie had helped with these issues, and he felt he did a decent job, but the emotional scars were deep, and he couldn’t fix them completely. So, he conceded.

“Of course, man,” he said.

Stan nodded, “Good. Now eat your damn salad dickweed.”

Richie flipped him off but obeyed.

Stan brought the idea to Eddie a few days later, when they were all chilling in the living room. Stan sat next to Eddie on the couch, while Richie was sprawled on their armchair. His tone was such that Richie and Eddie knew he was trying to be gentle, but any outsider who didn’t know Stan would probably interpret it as blunt and emotionless.

Any worry either Stan or Richie had of a fight had been in vain, for Eddie revealed he had already been planning to attend counseling.

“You’re absolutely right,” Eddie agreed. “I just want to take the first week or two to get adjusted to school and figure out the best time in my schedule for it.”

“Oh, well. Okay then. Cool,” Stan said, clearly relieved and at a loss for words.

Eddie looked confused, “Wait, was this like an intervention? Dude, I appreciate the concern, but why the hell wouldn’t I go?”

Stan tensed slightly at the question and shot a nervous gaze towards Richie before quickly correcting himself and looking away. “Oh, um, no reason. Just wanted to make sure is all.” Then he stood quickly and took he and Eddie’s half-full glasses. “I’ll get us some more water,” he announced, then walked to their kitchen.

Eddie turned towards Richie and gave him a questioning look. Richie kept his face neutral and only shrugged in answer, then turned his face back to the book he’d been reading.

The topic of counseling didn’t come up again that night, but Richie wasn’t able to focus on anything. He sat there only pretending to read. He knew Stan had been apprehensive about suggesting counseling only because of the adverse reactions Richie would give him when any conversation approached the topic.

Despite the lingering scars of the past, Eddie was genuinely happy most days, which made Richie’s heart swell. This was what he dreamed of. Living with his best friends, the three of them happy in their pursuits, and sharing their time together in the evenings. The freedom that came with being an adult and the joy it brought him would leave Richie baffled as to why anyone ever had kids. Didn’t they remember how much being a kid sucked absolute ass?

But people kept having kids, which kept Eddie busy at his job.

Richie came home from a double shift one night in late July, feet aching from being in roller skates all damn day. His thoughts were all occupied on fantasizing about how good it would feel to soak them in the tub, but it turned out that Eddie had beat him to it.

“Oh hey,” Eddie greeted, craning his neck to look at Riche over his shoulder from his position. Eddie was currently perched on the side of the tub, which was half-full with his feet in the water. “How was your day?”

“Long as hell,” Richie answered, dragging his socks off. “Mind if I join you? My feet are killing me.”

Eddie scrunched his nose. “I mean no, but you should. I spent all day outside, my feet are dirty as hell man.”

“Don’t care,” Richie replied in a sing song voice, quickly sitting on the other end of the tub. He sighed in relief the second his feet hit the warm (and admittedly dirty) water. “Fuck that feels good.”

Eddie snorted, “Don’t cream your jeans dude.”

Richie retaliated by splashing water towards Eddie, causing him to squeak when it hit his calves. Richie allowed himself a moment to appreciate Eddie in his red shorts which were just a tad too short. Despite the crazy amount of sunblock he wore, his skin was tanned and gorgeous, only blemished by a couple of band-aids he got from the odd scrapes and bruises that came with the nature of the job. Bless whichever God there was that put the idea in Eddie’s head to work as a camp counselor in the Georgia sun.

“What about you?” He asked. “Did you have a good day?”

Eddie shook his head, “Not particularly bad, just Thursday man.”

“Huh?”

“Sorry, uh, Thursdays are the worst day for kids. The week’s been too long, they’re tired of all the activities, but since it isn’t Friday yet they see no end in sight.” He shrugged, “I kept noticing we would have the most incident reports on Thursdays, and even kids who had been good all week would act up on Thursday.”

Richie hummed in response, reflecting on how observant and empathetic Eddie could be. Richie could tell Eddie was damn good at his job, and it most likely all stemmed from the simple fact that Eddie cared. He cared about what he did, he cared about the kids, so he couldn’t help but be great. Richie knew they weren’t paying him nearly enough, but Eddie didn’t mind. He had a pretty impressive bank account because of what his parents’ left him, but he was careful and wanted at least some income coming in, even a modest

one. Besides, he needed something to fill his day; something to push him to habitually leave the apartment and feel human again.

“What the fuck?” Richie and Eddie both turned their upper bodies to see Stan standing in the bathroom doorway with a look of bafflement on his face as he took in the image before him.

“Staniel, you’re home!” Richie exclaimed, hamming up his enthusiasm. “Join us baby.”

Stan scrunched up his nose in disgust, “Absolutely not. I have no idea what the fuck you’re doing, but I know I do not want in.”

“Our feet hurt,” Eddie said, trying to explain.

“Yeah, not that you would know anything about that at your hoity toity internship,” Richie playfully quipped. Stan had been interning at a boutique accounting firm over the summer and had another lined up at a large bank for the fall semester. They both paid surprisingly well for an internship, and to land them was an impressive accomplishment. But Richie loved to tease Stan mercilessly for this.

“Ugh,” Stan said, turning in the door and walking away.

“That’s right, take that yuppie shit back to Buckhead asshole!” Richie called after him, causing Eddie to burst into laughter.

The last week of summer camp was only a few weeks later, because Georgia public school went back to school early enough to be offensive. Eddie still had a job at the regular Y day care, but since college hadn’t started yet there was still a lot of college kids in town who had worked summer camp and were now trying to get as many hours as they could before going back to school, so Eddie’s hours were limited.

Stan’s internship also ended, and he had the remaining weeks off before going back to school and starting his new internship. Which meant, in a crazy turn of events, Richie was the roommate who was unquestionably doing the most with his days.

“Am I the only one who works in this family?” Richie announced loudly after arriving home late one night and finding Eddie and Stan in the middle of a 1,000 piece puzzle.

Stan’s only response was to throw one of the couch pillows at Richie, which he easily avoided with the aid of his roller skates.

“I thought we agreed you wouldn’t wear those in the house.” Eddie said without looking at him, not breaking his concentration with the puzzle.

“We sure did Edward, but this isn’t a house now is it?”

“Can it with the technicalities Tozier, take off those damn skates,” Stan said, also without breaking concentration with the pieces.

Richie tutted in false annoyance but sat on the couch and obliged.

“So fellas,” Richie began, plowing on when it was clear Stan and Eddie weren’t going to convey any sign of whether or not they were listening. “I have the day off tomorrow.”

“Me too,” Eddie mumbled to himself but loud enough for the other two to hear, sounding much less enthusiastic about the situation than Richie.

“Perfect!” Richie exclaimed, his volume unexpectedly high enough that the other two jumped, knocking them out of their puzzle-induced trance. “We’ll have a family bonding day!”
Stan looked exhausted already.

“What would such a day entail?” Eddie asked hesitantly.

Their disinterest did nothing to mitigate Richie’s elation. “Whatever we like! But I think Staniel and I have a responsibility to take you to some of the dumb tourist traps we neglected when you first moved down here.”

Eddie grimaced at the suggestion, but Stan spoke before he could say anything. “That’s actually a good idea, sounds fun.”

Eddie turned to Stan and gave him a skeptical look, to which Stan

only shrugged.

“Success!” Richie declared, simultaneously standing up from the couch. “I’ll leave you both to your very important business now,” he added sarcastically before walking to the restroom to shower. Stan only groaned in response, already having shifted his focus back to the puzzle.

An hour later, Richie was freshly showered and eating a bowl of microwaved ramen in his bed. He was watching a Disney movie on the shitty TV he bought from Goodwill, the only light in his room being from the TV and the fairy lights hung around his bed. He had shoved his bed into the corner again when they moved into the apartment, since Eddie would now have his own room.

“Hey,” Eddie said now, standing in the ever-open door frame.

“Oh hey,” Richie said, slightly surprised to see him. “I thought you’d gone to bed?” It was kind of late for Eddie, had been kind of late when Richie first arrived home, but the lack of work schedule meant Eddie had been staying up later over the past few days.

Eddie shook his head. “Can I join you?”

“Course,” Richie answered, scooting into the corner to give Eddie room.

Eddie settled next to him, slightly more relaxed than Richie since he didn’t have to sit up in a position more conducive to eating.

They were silent for a few minutes, letting the movie play. It wasn’t uncomfortable, but Richie could sense a heavier presence.

“You okay Eds?” he asked.

Eddie let out a deep sigh. “No,” he answered.

“Do you want to talk about?”

Eddie thought for a moment then replied, “I don’t know.”

“Okay.” Richie answered, and left it at that.

After several more minutes of silence, Eddie began talking. “It’s been hard this week, not doing anything during the day. It’s left a lot of time to be alone with my thoughts.”

Richie nodded, unsure of what to say to that and not wanting to interrupt. He did take a moment to lean over Eddie’s body and lay the now empty bowl on his bedside table.

The action did nothing to discourage Eddie. “And I kept feeling anxious, and I didn’t know why. Then I realized. I just.” He took a shaky breath, holding back tears. “I keep waiting for her to call, Rich. I keep waiting for her to call, which makes me so damn nervous because of how awful she was, but I keep waiting for her to call because I fucking miss her.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Richie said, wrapping his arms around Eddie. “Of course you miss her, dude. Of course you do.”

Eddie was crying now, allowing himself to be held by Richie, who ran his fingers through Eddie’s hair. His hair was still short, certainly shorter than Richie’s, but had gotten longer than Richie had ever seen it during these past months.

Once he began to calm down, still crying but now able to speak, Eddie began saying, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Dude. Stop,” Richie said, squeezing where he was holding on to Eddie. “You lost your mom. That’s fucking hard and unfair. It’s okay to feel this way.”

Eddie nodded gratefully, allowing himself the time to continue to calm down while Richie continued to hold him.

“Can I sleep in here tonight?” Eddie asked, bringing Richie back into the moment. His tears had stopped, but they left behind their evidence, Eddie’s eyes red and swollen.

“Course Eds, you don’t have to ask.” Richie loosened his arms but didn’t pull away when Eddie didn’t give any indication of moving away.

“I know, but I want to make sure I’m not crossing any boundaries. I

doubt you suspected this was the kind of thing you were signing up for when you agreed to live with me."

Richie snorted, ignoring the pang of guilt that surged through him. He never initiated sharing a bed because he didn't want to take advantage of Eddie. That wasn't what this was, Richie knew that. But Eddie was unaware of Richie's feelings. If he knew, would he really want to be sharing a bed with Richie? Would he even want to stay friends?

"Need I remind you," Richie finally responded, "That you moving in was less an agreement and more me telling you that we would be living together?"

Eddie smiled and didn't say anything. Richie was struck by his beauty, looking nearly radiant under the soft light.

"Is there anything I can do?" Richie asked.

Eddie shook his head, then hummed in thought. "You can turn off the TV and fairy lights off. I'm tired as hell."

Richie chuckled and obliged, untangling himself from Eddie to do so. When he laid back down in bed Eddie didn't reach out for him again but did scoot closer.

"Goodnight Chee," he whispered.

"Goodnight Eds," he answered.

The next day had been one for the books. A perfect summer day; the Georgia sun still hot but blessedly less humid than typical. Richie and Stan stayed true to their word, dragging Eddie to the World of Coke.

"Try this one," Richie said, handing Eddie another filled plastic cup on the tasting floor, where there were soda fountains with various soft drink flavors from different countries to try. "It's the best," he promised.

Eddie looked into the cup, giving the beverage a skeptical look.

He looked to Stan for reassurance, who smiled at him and nodded. "I

prefer that pineapple one from Costa Rica, but Richie's not wrong."

"And it's called the Beverly," Richie implored, "So you have to."

"Okay, okay," Eddie agreed, chuckling at the name. He brought the cup to his lips and took a sip. Then promptly spit some out and started coughing. "What the fuck guys?"

Richie and Stan were dying with laughter. "Sorry, sorry," Richie said once they recovered enough. Eddie's arms were crossed, unamused.

"Sorry," Stan echoed, "We couldn't resist. It's what you do to out-of-towners; have them drink the Beverly."

"But I'm not an out-of-towner," Eddie protested.

"Not anymore baby," Richie said, wrapping an arm around Eddie's shoulders and giving him a squeeze.

Eddie's posture softened. "Just wait until I tell Beverly how nasty her soda is."

"You will do no such thing," Stan said. "Because we will be doing the exact same thing to her when she comes to visit."

Eddie laughed then, now truly feeling in on the joke.